



Running Head: THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

## Qualitative Research Proposal

The Story Behind the Story: Meanings of Having One's Story Told By the  
American News Media

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### Abstract

Numerous polls and studies indicate Americans view the news media industry as being insensitive and intrusive when it comes to covering news stories with a high element of human interest. Through qualitative research methods, the purpose of this study is to examine this aspect of news coverage from the point of view of exemplars to see whether prevailing attitudes accurately reflect the experience of those involved. The meanings exemplars attribute to these experiences may suggest useful guidelines for journalists and journalism educators, public relations and public affairs professionals, and others such as crisis counselors and emergency response personnel who might interact with people involved in a newsworthy event.

## The Story Behind the Story: Meanings of Having One's Story Told By the American News Media

"In journalism, one person's pain is another's profession."

Raymond Schroth (1995)  
in Columbia Journalism Review

### Introduction

It was late and he seemed lost. Something terrible had happened. They told him to come to John F. Kennedy International Airport right away.

Maybe they told him where he was supposed to go.

But it was late. He got confused.

And so the middle-aged man, his two friends at his side, accidentally waded into a sea of journalists and police officers milling in the moonlight outside the Delta Airlines Terminal. He was surrounded by people talking, and laughing, swilling coffee from paper cups. Some adjusted intricate pieces of electronic equipment.

At first, no one noticed him. They were all too busy or bored.

Then someone realized he wasn't a reporter. He wasn't a cop.

He was just a guy who a few hours earlier put his wife and two daughters on Swissair Flight 111 to Geneva.

Suddenly, the man, his face a mask of stone, was surrounded by more than two dozen reporters, all demanding to know who he was, how he felt, what he knew."

(McGraw, 1998, paragraphs 1-8)

In the time it takes for an airliner to disappear from a radar screen or a bomb to explode, the taken-for-granted everyday life of survivors, friends, and family members may be changed forever. As unwelcome facts begin emerging from the darkest of fears, survivors and loved ones struggle to cope with the demands of tragedy. Often, one of these demands is the presence of the news media.

Less than 12 hours (after I reported the rape), my doorbell was ringing and the media were there. It wasn't one member, and it wasn't 20 members. There were somewhere near 100 members of the media outside my home within 24 hours of the crime. There were satellite trucks--you name it, they were there.

Here is this confused, traumatized mind and body trying to grasp what the heck these people are doing here... (Bowman, 1994, p. 218)

Recent high-profile news events, such as the death of Princess Diana in 1997 and the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, have brought to the forefront the ongoing debate over what constitutes appropriate media coverage of private lives and public tragedy. The debate is not a new one. As far back as 1890, Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren complained, "The press is overstepping in every direction the obvious bounds of propriety and decency" (Reporter's Committee for Freedom of the Press, 1998, paragraph 2). As a result of their indignation, Brandeis and Warren conceptualized a new right for Americans, the right to be left alone (Middleton, Chamberlin & Bunker, 1997).

The debate has taken on new urgency in the information age, however. Real-time communications--cellular phone technology, for example--enable media to be on-scene almost as quickly--and sometimes even before--emergency personnel. Satellite technology has made live coverage of breaking news the norm, and given audiences

unforgettable images such as Grace Corrigan watching the space shuttle Challenger explode with her daughter Christa McAuliffe on board. Cable News Network and other all-news networks have revolutionized the amount of broadcast news coverage available to audiences, and in turn, have created an almost insatiable need for more audio, more video, more story angles, and more interviews.

The debate continues between the news media industry and the American public. With very few exceptions, however, survivors and family members who have experienced a tragedy and been a part of the ensuing news media coverage have not been a part of this dialogue. This study is an attempt to give voice to people who have “been there,” and explore the meanings they have attached to these significant life events.

### Statement of Purpose

This study explores the meaning of the exemplification process for people who are pursued as exemplars in the telling of a news story. Aust and Zillman (1996) use the term “exemplar” to describe a victim or eyewitness that provides a reaction or testimonial regarding a newsworthy event. Aust and Zillman write that an exemplar can convey the human drama and relevant issues of an event or issue more effectively than reporters’ verbal descriptions (p. 788). Aust and Zillman also write that these accounts are an integral part of news packaging and typically emphasize close-up camera techniques to best capture powerful emotional reactions.

Aust and Zillman (1996) use the term “exemplification” in the context of bringing relevance to issues through the use of persuasive and emotion-laden interviews with victims or eyewitnesses. In this paper, however, exemplification is used to describe the

process exemplars experience in being approached and interviewed by the media.

Exemplification includes the publication or broadcast of exemplars' stories, outcomes for exemplars, and the meanings exemplars assign to their experience.

Numerous polls and studies indicate Americans view the news media industry as being insensitive and intrusive when it comes to covering news stories with a high element of human interest. Through qualitative research methods, the purpose of this study is to examine this aspect of news coverage from the point of view of exemplars to see whether prevailing attitudes accurately reflect the experience of those involved. The meanings exemplars attribute to these experiences may suggest useful guidelines for journalists and journalism educators, public relations and public affairs professionals, and others such as crisis counselors and emergency response personnel who might interact with people involved in a newsworthy event.

### Background and Literature Review

The late 1990s have seen two trends--possibly related--develop in the news media industry. News content has shifted from traditional "hard news" topics such as foreign affairs and social issues to more human interest oriented coverage. At the same time, the American public has grown increasingly disillusioned with sensationalized coverage and what are perceived to be insensitive and intrusive newsgathering techniques.

#### News Media Environment

The self-reports of news organizations and content analyses of television news broadcasts, news magazines and major national newspapers show an increasing emphasis in news coverage on people and human interest stories and a decline in traditional news

reporting on government and social policy (Committee of Concerned Journalists [CCJ], 1997). In the results of a study on the changing definition of news, the CCJ reported there has been a “shift toward featurized and people-oriented approach to the news, away from traditional straight news accounts. This tends to make the news more thematic and make the journalist more a story teller and mediator than a reporter” (CCJ, 1997, paragraph 5). A 1998 article in the Columbia Journalism Review reported on a survey by the Project for Excellence in Journalism that found among other things that human interest stories increased from 15 to 43 percent on television newscasts and in the front pages of newspapers and news magazines (Hickey, 1998). Hickey explains how this trend continues with the increase in “soft” television news magazines (e.g., Dateline and PrimeTime Live), which deliver audiences to networks but are far cheaper to produce than standard entertainment fare. Human interest news and pseudo-news is not only cost effective in terms of production, but also in terms of the audiences this coverage delivers (Hickey, 1998).

#### Public Dissatisfaction with News Media

While news coverage has moved from “hard” to “soft,” various polls report an increasing perception on the part of the public that the news media are insensitive and intrusive. Much of this criticism was fueled by the August 1997 death of Princess Diana. Even before that, however, studies suggest the public was highly critical. The Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) cited a January 1997 Roper Center poll in which “82 percent of Americans think reporters are insensitive to people’s pain when covering disasters and accidents” (RTNDA, 1998, News Judgment and Ethics, paragraph 2). Jacqueline Sharkey, in the American Journalism Review (1997), cited a 1996 study



by the Center for Media and Public Affairs which reported 80 percent of those surveyed felt the press ignored people's privacy. In a Pew Research Center study titled "Press Unfair, Inaccurate and Pushy" (1997), more than 60 percent of respondents felt television programs and newspapers unnecessarily invaded people's privacy beyond what was reasonable to cover what was in the public interest. Sharkey describes this as a paradox in the relationship between the press and the public: "People respond to certain types of coverage, then criticize the press for providing it" (1997, paragraph 50). In a Newsweek article, a Fox News vice president described the same paradox. "They reward us by watching, then complain about what they see" (Turner, 1999, p. 45).

#### Ethical Considerations

The issue is not a new one--and in fact, is reflected in codes of ethics subscribed to by news media representatives. The code of ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) goes into relative depth under the subheading of "Minimize harm" (SPJ, 1998).

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. Journalists should:

Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.

Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.

Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.

Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials...Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.

Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.

Louis Hodges says that as the press' capability for invading privacy has increased, so, too, has its willingness to do so (Hodges, 1994). "When we see reporters poking microphones into the face of the mother who has just witnessed a fire that killed her three children, most of us are morally outraged" (p. 197). After tracing the social and legal history of the concept of privacy, he suggests a formal criterion for journalists to apply when considering whether to intrude on an individual's privacy. Hodges writes reporters should do so only if "information about the individual is of overriding public importance and the public need cannot be met by other means" (p. 203). He continues, "The mere fact that people want to know is not enough to warrant the harm done to an individual by an invasion of his or her circles of intimacy. Any significant harm to the individual outweighs the public benefit in every imaginable case" (p. 204).

The issue has also been discussed in media ethics treatises and pedagogic forums. The Journal of Mass Media Ethics has devoted entire issues to the topic of journalism and privacy. Michigan State University's School of Journalism established the "Victims and the Media Program" in 1991 "in response to growing concerns about the media's handling of victims" (Michigan State University [MSU] School of Journalism, 1999, paragraph 1). In addition to focusing on media treatment and portrayals of victims, MSU also seeks to educate journalists about more humane techniques of approaching and interviewing victims. Some of MSU's tips to journalists include granting victims a sense

of power and control and being prepared to be the first to deliver bad news that a loved one has been killed or maimed (MSU, 1999). (In perhaps tacit recognition of the competitive aspect of journalism, the latter tip does not even discuss the possibility that a journalist wait to contact a family until after the family has received some form of official notification regarding the tragic news event!)

The perception of reporters as unscrupulous vultures (Turner, 1999, p. 45) that will go to any length to get a story does have some basis in fact, and accounts of journalistic abuses are not uncommon. One reporter pretended to be a family member of a TWA Flight 800 victim in order to gain access to legitimate family members sequestered in a nearby airport hotel (Freedom Speaks, 1998). The reporter was arrested. Following the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, one reporter donned rescue worker attire to be able to enter the ruins (Freedom Speaks, 1998). In an effort to respect the Kennedy and Bessette families' privacy following the crash of John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s aircraft off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, the FAA established unprecedented airspace restrictions to keep media at least five miles away from operations to recover the aircraft wreckage and bodies. "The FAA found that some pilots promptly violated the restrictions by turning off equipment relaying their aircraft's identification information to air traffic controllers" (Johnson, 1999, paragraphs 26-27).

### Legal Considerations

The question of where individuals' right to privacy ends and where journalists' First Amendment rights begin is as much at issue in the courts as it is in other public forums. Litwin (1998, p. 1095) writes that the courts have "historically granted great deference to the journalist's First Amendment rights" as well as providing legal

protection of routine newsgathering activities in public places. Furthermore, the American legal system has a longstanding legal bias against prior restraint of speech, preferring instead to punish harmful expression after dissemination (Middleton, et al., 1997, p. 57).

In practical terms, this means journalists are free to seek out exemplars and cover individuals in legitimate news stories as long as the journalists are not otherwise breaking any laws such as trespassing or breaking and entering. A number of privacy tort laws have evolved, most notably the torts of private facts and intrusion (Middleton, et al., 1997). These torts provide a basis for a plaintiff to sue another person for either disseminating “private information that ‘(a) would be highly offensive to a reasonable person and (b) is not of legitimate concern to the public’” (p. 163) or for the “physical, electronic, or mechanical invasion of another’s solitude or seclusion” (p. 174). Torts, however, generally would be filed sometime after the news event or crisis (in contrast to injunctive legal actions for which there is little basis in privacy law) and thus arguably are less relevant for purposes of this study.

#### Media Perceptions of News Coverage

Far from being critical of the role the media play in covering tragedy, some reporters feel their work plays a part in helping participants or the public deal with the event. Schroth (1995, paragraph 7) writes that although journalists seek “the damn great story,” they also provide comfort by giving participants the language with which to express their pain. “The journalist knows...his moral obligation is to help that foundry worker find the language, to be his scream, a scream that takes flesh in bold headlines,

pictures, text, and layout that make the story jump off the page into the reader's heart" (Schroth, 1995, paragraph 14).

Sharkey (1997) quotes similar sentiments among news professionals in the aftermath of Princess Diana's death. She quotes a Cable News Network editor as pointing out coverage of Diana's funeral "enabled millions of Americans to share their grief, and 'there aren't many shared experiences that occur these days'" (paragraph 32). Lisa Stark, a correspondent for ABC News, has said although it is awkward, it is not usually difficult to find exemplars.

"Usually there are some family members who want to talk. I mean it may be hard to believe, but some people want to tell you about the person they lost. It's part of their grieving process. Also, in a sense, they're saying, 'This was an important person. I want you to know what this person was about, what they did'" (Freedom Speaks, 1998, paragraph 18).

Stark and other reporters point out that they and many other journalists seek to treat exemplars with compassion and respect.

"People may not believe this, but there are times I have turned off the camera when people start crying...There's no question television is about emotion. But if you're on a one-on-one individual interview with someone, you don't need to see them break down on camera" (Freedom Speaks, 1998, paragraph 37-39).

Indeed, recent literature, has documented the psychological and emotional toll on the reporters who cover tragic news events. Ricchiardi (1999) writes that reporters are potential secondary victims of trauma by the function they perform. "Researchers point out that the media, in helping audiences see and feel human tragedy, must process

information profoundly to convey it effectively. And that can spark greater emotional turmoil” (Ricchiardi, 1999, p. 37). Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist Kevin Carter took his own life just months after taking the photograph that would mark the pinnacle of his career (Ricchiardi, 1999). Carter called his experience of documenting a vulture stalking a starving Sudanese girl “the most horrifying of my career” (Ricchiardi, 1999, p. 38). Another photojournalist expounded on this theme. “Nobody does this kind of work to make themselves feel good. It is very hard to continue” (Ricchiardi, 1999, p. 38). Gary Matsumoto, reporter for Fox News, likewise described covering the crash of TWA Flight 800 as “one of the most excruciating experiences I have ever gone through” (O’Brien, 1998, paragraph 1).

When asked why media engage in the difficult and often personally unpleasant task of covering airline crashes, reporter Lynn Lunsford responded:

Because in the case of a plane crash, for example, if you do not know anything about who the people were on that airplane, then it’s just another machine that broke. What makes it important to you and me and the reason we want to know about this plane crash is because there were real people on it. And they were more than just the name on the victim list. They were people who had lives, who were going about their lives and obviously didn’t plan for this to happen.

(Freedom Speaks, 1998)

Associated Press reporter Jay Reeves found no difficulty in finding exemplars following a devastating tornado in Alabama that killed 33 people. He said all the victims were willing to talk to him (O’Brien, 1998, paragraph 4). Reeves rationalizes the potential hurt his stories may cause people by looking also at the good the stories can

bring. “‘They’re getting something out of telling their stories.’ Victims often find it therapeutic to talk to reporters,’ he said” (O’Brien, 1998, paragraph 5).

### Expressing Pain in the Grief Process

Literature in the field of bereavement counseling and grief work bears out the benefit of expression in cases of profound personal loss. Cleiren (1991) reports research suggesting expressing the painful effects of loss is a common task in successful adaptation. Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch (1990) as discussed in Harvey (1995) describe outcry, or the expression of pain, as a requisite early step in their model of recovery from major loss. Harvey posits that this sharing of pain, in the traditional narrative form of story telling, gives the bereaved an opportunity to engage in meaning making, without which there can be no healing.

In her book dealing with recovery from loss, Carol Staudacher emphasizes the connection between talking and healing. “You need to tell your story; not once, but repeatedly...As you recount your experience, you benefit by both a physical and emotional release” (Staudacher, 1987, p. 201). This same message was the theme of a sermon given in a Littleton, Colorado, Unitarian church on the Sunday following the violence at Columbine High School that left 14 people dead:

In the two days following my hearing of the news [of the shooting],...I found that I needed to tell my story--my story of how I heard the news and how it impacted me...I realized that each one of you has a story that needs to be told--again, and again, and again. It is in the telling of the stories that the healing begins.

(Dowgiert, 1999, paragraph 2)

Perhaps the central question regarding the appropriateness of news coverage and the experience of exemplars is best captured in the analysis of news coverage of the Columbine High School shooting. Dave Cullen of Salon.com Internet magazine wrote a column entitled "Who owns the Columbine tragedy?" (Cullen, 1999). The question is a good one.

Many Littleton residents felt the tragedy belonged to the community and that the media's behavior and coverage had gone too far. A 17-year old survivor of the shooting wrote:

I'm also saddened by a lot of the news coverage of Columbine. Some reporters respected our grief, but many were insulting. As one TV reporter primped for the camera, he was heard to say: "Do I look devastated enough?" And even people who hated Dylan and Eric [the shooters] were appalled by the magazine cover that called them "The Monsters Next Door." They were our friends, too. They were just kids. But someone had to make monsters out of them. (Adams, 1999, p.41)

Nowhere was this antipathy toward the media more evident than on the day Columbine students returned to classes. More than 400 parents and school supporters formed a human chain to keep reporters and photographers away from students. "Mostly, I'm just here to keep people like you away," one member of the chain said. "These kids need their peace. Enough already." (McDowell, 1999, paragraphs 16-17)

Others, however, saw the entire back-to-school rally as one big event designed for the media. "Ironically, the main story will likely be a giant choreographed ritual, where students symbolically 'Take Back the School' from the media, who they believe have



turned their home into a national symbol of mass murder and youth violence.” (Cullen, 1999, paragraph 1) A 15-year-old Columbine student echoed the intent of using the media to send a message:

“People want to see us go back into that school. What happened here hit the world as one big tragedy. It’s news. We’ll go back and be proud of being rebels. Going in shows courage. *We want the world to see it.*” [Emphasis added.]

(McDowell, 1999, paragraph 15)

The intentional or unintentional contradictory actions and statements of Littleton students, school officials, and community members may reflect our general lack of understanding of exemplification and the interaction of exemplars and news media representatives in times of crisis.

#### Rationale and Significance

There is no reason presently to expect that the public appetite for dramatic news and feature coverage will decline, and news operations will continue to try and meet that demand. Legislative and judicial actions aimed at curbing journalistic abuses and protecting survivors and family members from excessive media intrusion will likely languish in litigation because of the broad protections of the First Amendment and the courts’ unwillingness to rule beyond the unique circumstances of the specific cases before them (Florida Star v. B.J.F., 1989). Although conflict may be inevitable among individual privacy rights, news media responsibility to report on the news, and the public interest in tragic happenings, greater understanding of the experience may benefit everyone involved. An extensive review of literature in the fields of psychology, social psychology, victim advocacy, journalism, and mass communication has uncovered very

little data or research from the point of view of “private people in the center of a bewildering circle of uninvited press attention” (Biagi, 1986, p. 49).

The focus of this study has universal relevance. Newsworthy events occur most every day, in most every community. People are almost always the center of a high-interest story, and studies of the use of exemplars in news coverage indicate their effectiveness in concisely and powerfully telling a news story (Aust & Zillman, 1996). Results from this study may be useful in helping journalists tread more carefully in the fragile terrain of people in crisis. Results may also assist public affairs personnel and crisis intervention specialists (e.g., crime victim advocates, chaplains, and counselors) in their work with those unexpectedly thrust into the limelight by tragedy.

### Research Questions

The general research question for this study is what does the exemplification process mean to exemplars, those people who are generally the ones most affected by the news coverage of tragedies. Three specific areas of interest derive from this: privacy, process, and outcomes.

The construct of privacy is a central issue in this study. What were exemplars' expectations of privacy? Did news coverage or reporter involvement affect feelings of security and control?

Questions about process seek to establish how the process of exemplification unfolded. What was the manner in which exemplars were contacted, and what language would exemplars use to characterize their interaction with the news media members (positive, negative, humane, ethical)? Since reporters are rarely accused of holding guns

to peoples' heads to get interviews, what were the thoughts and feelings of the exemplars that made them consent to what often turn out to be very emotional and difficult interviews? How did exemplars perceive the actual experience of being interviewed, photographed, or recorded? What about the experience was affirming or uncomfortable? What role did intermediaries play and how did that help or hinder in the crisis situation?

Finally, this study seeks to understand the outcomes of the exemplification process on exemplars. What was the meaning exemplars assigned to the event and their role within it? What was the meaning of the news coverage itself? Did it facilitate the healing process or complicate people's suffering? Have meanings changed or evolved with the passage of time? How do exemplars' views overlap or diverge from news media's self critiques? Where do exemplars' meanings and views overlap, and where do they diverge? What lessons can exemplars share with us? And finally, what are the implications of the exemplar experience on future research and news coverage?

One of the defining features of naturalistic inquiry according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is the concept of emergent design. Qualitative research demands flexibility in order for the researcher to respond to data as it is provided by informants. These research questions, as well as the draft long interview guide at Appendix A, will undoubtedly be refined during and following the active interviews with informants.

## Methodology

### Assumptions and World View

The dominant worldview in the last two centuries has been that of the logical positivists (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some key assumptions of positivism are that social

facts have an objective reality and that variables can be identified and relationships measured (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The social world, as well as the physical world, exists independently of people's perceptions, and this world is an unchanging structure (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Positivists hold that various studies of the same phenomenon may not result in the exact same findings, but will ultimately converge on the same objective reality or truth (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The modern American news media industry developed in a culture of positivism, and members of the American public generally take the tenets of positivism for granted. For most, positivism is not the dominant paradigm, but rather the only paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This outlook may explain the current state of knowledge regarding the exemplar experience. Just as the objective scientist peers at a fruit fly through a microscope, the American public has peered at the media's chronicling of personal crisis and tragedy through the television and newspaper. The scientist records findings in journals and audience members register their opinions in polls or backlash. The last few years have seen more journalistic reflexivity, with news media members also trying to take an "objective" look at the way they and their industry treat people and package private people's stories. Metaphorically speaking, the fruit flies and actual exemplars have yet to be heard from!

The underlying assumptions for this study flow from the naturalistic worldview. In contrast to positivism's belief in an objective reality that exists and can be discovered, proponents of the naturalistic paradigm believe multiple realities exist and are constructed by participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Positivists seek to discover general laws in the world by breaking things down and operationalizing them so the world

ultimately may be controlled and predicted. Naturalists believe things should be studied holistically and in context to produce understanding instead (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Upon a naturalistic foundation then, the ideas of several noted sociological theorists are relevant to this study. Herbert Blumer is one of the major figures in the development of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction holds that individuals “take and make meaning in their interaction with others (Marshall and Rossman, 1995) Blumer (1969, p. 50) wrote that “social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them.” Blumer goes on to state that a scholar who wishes to understand the actions of people must first see the world and its objects as these people see it.

Goffman, among other contributions, brought the metaphor of the theater to the subject of human interaction (Goffman, 1959). He posited that people “perform” in roles that are both in and out of character. These performances occur in different regions; some are front stage and are intended for a more public audience while others are back stage and performed only for an intimate circle or simply the self.

Blumer and Goffman’s work suggests human interaction and communication is dynamic and active. Some of the research questions for this study of exemplar perceptions center on whether the informant played an active or passive role in the media exemplification process. Goffman’s framework may be especially useful in analyzing data in this light.

The selection of qualitative research techniques rather than more traditional quantitatively-oriented methods follows naturally from adopting the naturalistic worldview and the nature of the research question. But there are many other pragmatic

reasons as well. The primary reason is based on the desired outcome from the research, which in this case is understanding and interpretation, not generalizability of findings nor causal explanations. Qualitative techniques are necessary for the former, and more positivist-based techniques for the latter (and the approaches are mutually exclusive, according to Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Another reason to select a qualitative approach is an underlying assumption of this study: the intuition that there are more things going on in the exemplification process than are generally recognized or understood. Quantitative research requires a complete understanding of what is to be measured before suitable instruments can be designed and tested to collect data. Not only would these definitional and operationalization steps be impossible as this study is designed, it would also defeat the very purpose of the study. In contrast, qualitative investigation does not impose any a priori frameworks on the data, but rather allows the data to “speak for itself” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Other aspects of this study make a qualitative approach preferable to a quantitative or positivistic-based model. First, the topic concerns what for most informants will likely be highly meaningful and emotional life events. The very presence of a human researcher over a sterile data collection instrument shows more consideration of the informant as a fellow human being. In an emotion-laden environment, a human researcher also can alter or halt the interview as necessary and convey comforting empathic understanding.

### Narrowing the Focus

Simply defining an exemplar as a victim or eyewitness that provides a reaction or testimonial regarding a newsworthy event is not sufficient to keep the focus of the study

to a manageable and productive level. Exemplars could be categorized in many ways based on characteristics of the exemplification experience. Table 1 on the following page sets out many such characteristics as well as dimensions that further reflect the range of possibilities.

For purposes of this study, every effort will be made to recruit informants who: are most directly involved in the news event (survivor or close family member or friend of a victim) and who suffered a profound loss. Most grief models posit that people exist in a state of shock or numbness immediately following awareness of their profound loss. It is during this and whose exemplification experience was widely publicized.

TABLE 1.

The Range of Exemplification Experience Characteristics

Characteristics	Dimensional Continua
Duration of news event:	One time--short duration--long term--ongoing
Level of involvement with news story:	Personal/direct (survivor)--close family--relative/friends--witness
Exemplar stance:	Villain--neutral/unknown/uncast--hero
Media coverage:	Local--regional--national--international  One encounter--multiple interactions--numerous interactions  Print--radio/TV--all media types
Media Relations Experience:	None--some indirect--some direct--extensive--professional communicator
Exemplar Compensation:	None--pro forma/in-kind--lucrative
Nature of Event:	Joyous--neutral--tragic
Scale of Loss:	None--some property--extensive property--loved one(s) injury--loved one(s) death
Control:	Passive involvement (photograph taken, conversation overheard)--on-the spot ("ambush" interviews)--Active involvement (advance consent to interview)
Physical Risk/Danger	Low--average--high



### Data Collection Strategy

The primary data collection strategy for this study is to conduct long interviews with informants as recommended by McCracken (1988). In certain cases, however, due to the emotional nature of the topic, some informants may wish to participate in the interview in a group--for example, a family group or co-workers who experienced the same event. In these cases, the interviews may function more as a focus group, with the researcher playing the role of a facilitator rather than interviewer. The focus group approach, if such a situation occurs, may serve a heuristic function and elicit information about the exemplification process that would not be apparent to a single informant without the interaction of others. This approach will be used at the discretion of the informants and researcher.

Where possible, individual and group narratives will be augmented with documentary evidence in the form of clips of written and broadcast news coverage, official documents and reports relating to the unfolding of events, after-action analyses, and any personal documents informants may volunteer to share (e.g., photographs, journal excerpts, etc.).

Except in exceptional circumstances, all interviews are planned to be conducted in person, preferably in the home of the informant. In-person interviews provide richer data through access to nonverbal communication. These strategies should yield rich data and foster maximum collaboration with research informants.

### Sampling Strategy

The overall sampling strategy for this study is based on theoretical and logistical considerations, and involves collecting data from three geographic areas: the Denver,

Colorado, metropolitan area; the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma metropolitan area; and the North Florida/Southern Georgia region.

The Denver suburb of Littleton was the location of the Columbine High School shooting in April 1999 that left 14 people dead and involved literally hundreds of survivors, family members, and potential exemplar informants. The relative recency of this tragedy may result in more vivid recollections and meanings borne in the early aftermath of the tragedy. The primary researcher is from a nearby Colorado city (Fort Collins) and this may help establish rapport in the recruitment and trust-building stages. Additionally, a child psychologist in Littleton whose son was a Columbine student at the time (and escaped uninjured) has offered to act as a research collaborator, in the capacity of informant, intermediary in requesting interviews, and as a member checker. This collaborator has extensive connections in counseling circles in the area, and was herself an exemplar for a major regional radio station and appeared live on Nightline with Ted Koppel.

Oklahoma City likely also has an extremely large pool of potential exemplar informants as a result of the April 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in which 168 men, women, and children were killed. More than four years will have passed between the tragedy and the data collection for this study. It may be interesting to compare and contrast accounts from Littleton and Oklahoma City in an effort to understand the implications of the passage of time as people ascribe meanings to their experiences. The primary researcher obtained her master's degree from the University of Oklahoma in Norman just 20 miles away, and this fact may facilitate site entry and rapport building with informants.

The final geographic data collection area--North Florida and South Georgia--is proposed for reasons of cost (within driving distance) and access (much more researcher flexibility in scheduling). Many potential informants reside in the area whose exemplar experiences differ greatly in circumstance. Potential exemplars include a diplomat held hostage in the U.S. Embassy in Iran for more than a year (and his wife); the widow of a U.S. Marine Corps officer executed in Lebanon; next-of-kin of military members based at Patrick and Eglin AFBs who were killed in the Khobar Towers bombing; survivors of the February 1997 night of tornadoes that killed more than 50 people in central Florida; and family members of victims of Gainesville mass murderer Danny Rollins, to name but a few possibilities.

The sampling strategy for the data collection will be a combination or mixed method (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and likely will include maximum variation (achieved primarily through the variety of experiences found in informants from the Southeast), critical case (thus the selection of the two landmark tragedies of Oklahoma City and Columbine), snowball, opportunistic, and disconfirming cases. The intent of the maximum variation sampling is not generalizability of findings, but rather to provide saturation of themes and transferability of findings within various contexts. Because of the inherent difficulty in identifying, locating, seeking, and obtaining interview participation consent from informants, the snowball technique likely will be efficacious. Instances where this might be appropriate is from exemplars who already knew or came to know other exemplars in the course of events and intermediaries such as public affairs officers who may have a personal connection or rapport with exemplars. This also applies to the strategy of seeking endorsement and assistance from victim advocacy

groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Drivers and the National Center for the Victims of Crime. Because of the expected expense of this study in terms of time and travel, opportunistic data collection also will be employed whenever appropriate to help control expenses while maintaining quality of informants. Finally, the sampling strategy also includes seeking out disconfirming cases. While the focus of this project is on people in crisis, interviews with informants who are caught up in good news stories may add to the understanding of the cases involving tragedy. All interviews and focus groups are expected to be conducted by the primary researcher.

### Protocol and Logistics

#### Field Entry

University institutional review board and Air Force approval are required prior to beginning this study. IRB review seeks to protect research participants from harm by reviewing study protocols. The Air Force Institute of Technology approval is required under terms of funding provided to the researcher to ensure research is purposeful, well designed, and potentially beneficial to the government. The Air Force Institute of Technology may also underwrite some of the travel costs associated with this project.

Once Air Force and university approval is received, the researcher will seek exemplar informants in a variety of ways. Foremost will be soliciting endorsement and referral from formal and ad hoc advocacy groups. Examples include The National Center for Victims of Crime, Pan Am Flight 103 Parents' Organization, Families of TWA Flight 800 Association, and Families of the Oklahoma City Bombing. Key staff in these organizations may be willing participants themselves or would have knowledge of people who would likely be agreeable to sharing their experiences. As part of the protocol of

long interviews, and as appropriate, the researcher could also ask informants for referrals, whether just names or actual assistance in contacting and requesting participation.

At the local and state level, participants will be recruited based on coverage in the media, suggestions from news media members, and, as needed, by asking for assistance from victims' advocates. These advocates may be familiar with clients with relevant experiences and may be willing to serve as a go-between researcher and potential informant to maintain clients' privacy.

### Schedule

The total study is scheduled to last 10 months. One month is built in as a contingency to enable additional data collection and analysis if required or to allow for unforeseen challenges.

September 1999:	Finalize funding, ensure Institutional Review Board and Air Force Institute of Technology approval of study, conduct pre-planning, schedule data collection (ongoing)
Oct -Dec 1999:	Schedule and accomplish data collection; transcribe, quality review, and catalogue data
January 2000:	Final data collection; transcribe, quality review, and catalogue data; begin coding and analysis
Feb-Mar 2000:	Analyze data; begin preliminary writing, collaborate with informants on meanings and interpretations
Apr-May 2000:	Write and revise study report, collaborate with informants
June 2000:	Submit report, fulfill obligations to informants for copies

of research, wrap up project

This research project is expected to be completed in June, and is intended to fulfill the partial requirements of a doctoral degree in mass communications with defense of this research projected for July 2000.

### Budget

Total cost for this study (excluding researcher's salary) is expected to be \$7,000. This budget estimate is intended as a high case scenario--with some planning and clustering of interviews, actual expenditures may be several thousand dollars less. The major source for funding this research is the primary researcher, with additional travel funding possible from the Air Force Institute of Technology. The major expenses are expected to be administrative support ( $\pm 50$  hours of data transcription and report preparation) and travel. See Table 2 following for the estimated project budget.

TABLE 2

Estimated Budget by Category for Exemplification Study

<u>Category</u>	<u>Expense</u>
Admin support (250 hours @ \$8 an hour)	\$2,000
Transportation (gas & airfares)	\$1,500
Lodging ( $\pm$ 20 nights at Govt Rate)	\$1,000
Food & Misc ( $\pm$ 45 days)	\$1,000
Supplies (Paper, copies, postage, tapes, etc.)	\$ 250
Equipment (Recorders & transcriber)	\$ 250
<u>Contingency Fund</u>	<u>\$1,000</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>\$7,000</u>

Facilities

Where possible, researcher will seek to conduct exemplar interviews in informants' homes. The home environment, though it sometimes may be noisy or otherwise distracting, offers the best opportunity for a relaxed atmosphere and to foster personal disclosure. The researcher will ask if news media interviews can be conducted in a private office or conference room of the news agency. This would minimize costs for the researcher and lessen inconvenience and time away from work for media informants brought on by travel to an outside interview location.

Interviews will be recorded with two audio recorders placed on the table. Audiotape is preferred over videotape to increase participants' sense of anonymity.

### Analysis

This study design is expected to generate nearly 50 hours of audiotape and in the neighborhood of 1,500 pages of transcribed data. Analysis will begin with reviewing transcripts, and identifying and coding themes. This in turn is expected to lead to the development of sensitizing concepts, or “a starting point in thinking about a class of data of which the social researcher has no definite idea and provides an initial guide to her research” (Denzin, 1997, p. 2). The nature of the data and themes will then direct the continuing review and analysis of the material. Two coders will code all material, with periodic and continuing checks for intercoder reliability.

Initially, data analysis for this project will be based in the symbolic interaction tradition of qualitative research, examining meaning making in social interaction (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). A primary goal of the analysis will be to find ways in which findings can be applied to seek to enhance the dignity of individuals in the exemplification process and build on already existing positive outcomes.

### Conclusion

The current lack of empirical data and understanding in the area of the exemplification process has had the effect of putting the news media, the public, and often times participants in news happenings at odds. Even if an exemplar has not been brutalized by the media (the so-called “second victimization,” according to the National Center for Crime Victims), public opinion is likely to be highly critical of the news media and their practices. Richard Stolley, senior editorial advisor at Time, Inc. wrote that “every story about another human being is in one sense an invasion of that person’s privacy. Circumstances and cooperation, if any, determine how invasive it is (Columbia



Journalism Review, 1997, The Diana Effect).” This study seeks to move beyond quick and easy evaluative judgments of the exemplification process into a more complete understanding of the outcomes on those most directly affected. In turn, this study may lead to recommendations to facilitate and improve cooperation between exemplars and news media representatives to meet the seemingly contradictory needs of all.

### Implications for Further Research

Results from this study may serve as a foundation for continuing research on the exemplification experience using a variety of research approaches. In the past, many researchers considered qualitative research useful only as a preliminary and exploratory step in conducting a full-scale statistically-oriented experiment or procedure in the future. While qualitative research is now appreciated more universally on its own merits and for the unique insights qualitative methods may produce, qualitative research results can still be used to develop experimental hypotheses or design more effective data collection instruments with an aim of generalizability of results.

Conducting similar studies in international settings (e.g., interviewing exemplars in various countries) may increase understanding of the role culture and societal norms play in the exemplification experience. One might expect English informants in a culture legendary for its citizens’ “stiff upper lip” to assign quite different meanings to the exemplification experience than say informants from Spain or Italy where emotion, stereotypically, at least, is more freely expressed. How do experiences vary between countries like America with deep penetration of news media programming (where exemplars-to-be will have witnessed thousands of exemplar episodes in news

programming before undergoing the experience themselves) and third world countries where exposure to exemplar episodes may be far more limited)? How might various political systems and media ownership structures affect exemplars' interpretations of their experience? For example, how free do exemplars feel in expressing their thoughts, with what effect on the overall experience?

A study using conversation analysis could corroborate or contradict findings from this study. Exemplars may express a feeling of controlling or not controlling the exemplification process and interview. Actual interviews recorded on video and audiotape could be analyzed for patterns of control to see if exemplars' perceptions of the interview episode were accurate. Repeated findings of reporter dominance in these exchanges could lead to findings of media exploitation. On the other hand, exchanges characterized more by meaning-making and the give and take of power in the relationship could substantiate news media representatives' self-perception of reporters as compassionate and empathetic.

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## Appendix A

### Draft Long Interview Question Guide

1. Can you describe how this event unfolded for you (and your family)? (Depending on informant and interview particulars, it may be more appropriate to lead in with a summary of the precipitating events and ask if that's the informant's understanding.)
2. Tell me about your experience, if any, with news media representatives during this time.
3. How were you (and your family) approached? (How did media find and contact you?)
4. How did you feel news media representatives acted toward you? How did you feel toward them? Who was in control of the process (and what made you feel so)?
5. Many people might wonder what it was you were thinking or feeling at that time such that you were willing to interact with journalists...
6. What was your experience of the coverage? How did you feel? What happened when your story was publicized?
7. What would you say to others about the news coverage experience who may face a similar situation? If you could do things over again, what might you do differently?
8. As you look back on this event, were your expectations of privacy met?
9. What other interaction have you had with news media members? Can you elaborate?



## Appendix B

University of Florida Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Release for Informant Participation

UFIRB Project #:

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE: PRINCIPAL MEMBER

My name is Anne Morris and I am a doctoral student at the University of Florida. I am doing a research study of people who have been interviewed by the news media following an unexpected newsworthy event. I am interested in how people understand these interactions and what meanings this experience holds for them. My work will be supervised by my professor, Dr. Linda C. Hon, of the College of Journalism and Communications. It will be used to fulfill partial research requirements for my degree.

You are invited to participate in this study as I try to learn from the public most directly affected by news media interviews. If you agree to participate, I will interview you on at least one occasion. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and conducted at your home (or other location that is agreeable to you). During that interview, which will last approximately an hour to an hour and a half, you will be asked to talk about how you came to be interviewed by the news media and what effect that experience has had on you and your significant others. Any subsequent interviews will be scheduled with you at your convenience, will last less than an hour, and will most likely be conducted over the phone at researcher expense. If needed, a follow-on interview would be conducted to clarify specific thoughts and comments from the original in-person interview. You will not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Although the interview(s) will be audio-taped and combined with interviews of other exemplars, the tapes will be coded so that your privacy is protected. The code sheets and tapes will be kept in secure storage at the University of Florida and will be erased within one year of completion of the project. Only Dr. Hon and I will have access to these tapes and their codes and transcriptions. These interviews will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law.

The interview data will be combined with other interviews so that specific information will not be tied to you or your family. When the report is completed, you will have the opportunity to see it and discuss it with me if you wish. My hope is that this research will benefit you in seeing how your experience compares to others who have faced similar situations. It may also better inform journalism educators, news media practitioners, legislators, and crisis intervention personnel on the news media interview experience as they develop, review and revise policy in this area.

If you have any questions, you may contact me or Dr. Linda Hon in the College of Journalism and Communications at (352) 392-1686. Any concerns about your rights as a participant may be directed to: UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250. Your decision to participate or not participate will not prejudice your relations with the University of Florida in any way. If you decide to participate, you are completely free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without consequence.

.....

I agree to voluntarily participate in the study of people who have been interviewed by the news media following an unexpected newsworthy event. My signature indicates that I have read the procedure described and I have received a copy of this description. I voluntarily agree to participate in the interview procedure. There are no anticipated risks for me. I will not be compensated for participation. I do not have to answer any questions that I do not wish to answer, and I may withdraw my participation without prejudice at any time after signing this form.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive a copy of the final "interview" manuscript submitted to the instructor. \_\_\_\_\_